‘Love with excess of heat’: The Sonnet and Petrarchan Excess in the Late Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Periods

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“LOVE WITH EXCESS OF HEAT”: THE SONNET AND PETRARCHAN EXCESS IN THE LATE ELIZABETHAN AND EARLY JACOBEAN PERIODS

In the English Renaissance, the Petrarchan lover was the figure of excess *par excellence*. In poems and plays of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods, his excessive desire and grief were expressed through a rhetoric characterised by a systematic resort to set devices and a repeated use of Petrarchan commonplaces. This has led to a certain misconception of Petrarchism in general, and of the Petrarchan sonnet in particular, as a meaningless juxtaposition of *clichés*. However, the literary criticism of the last three decades has shown that the excesses of the lover were part of the very issues Petrarchan sonnets sought to address. In that sense, sonnet sequences are not to be set apart from other literary works of the period, though their moral ambiguity is probably responsible for some of their critical misfortune. Drawing from varied sources, this paper explains the literary, cultural and moral reasons why excess was so central an issue for both Petrarchan poets and those who criticised their work in the 1590s and 1600s.

En Angleterre, à la Renaissance, l'amant pétrarquiste était la figure de l'excès par excellence. Dans les poèmes et les pièces de la fin de l'époque élisabéthaine et du début de l'ère jacobéenne, sa douleur et son désir excessifs étaient exprimés par une rhétorique spécifique, caractérisée par un recours systématique à certains procédés et un usage répété de lieux communs pétrarquistes. Cet état de fait a favorisé une conception du pétrarquisme en général, et du sonnet pétrarquiste en particulier comme une juxtaposition de clichés vide de sens. Cependant, la critique littéraire des dernières décennies a montré que les excès de l'amant étaient au cœur des problématiques soulevées par les sonnets. En ce sens, il convient de ne pas marginaliser les recueils amoureux dans le paysage littéraire de l'époque, bien qu'il faille reconnaître que leur ambiguïté morale les a probablement desservis. À partir de sources diverses, cet article montre le caractère central de l'excès et ses enjeux littéraires, culturels et moraux pour les poètes pétrarquistes et pour ceux qui critiquaient leurs écrits dans les années 1590 et 1600.

Love with excesse of heat, more yong then old,
   Death kills with too much cold;
Wee dye but once, and who lov’d last did die,
   Hee that saith twice, doth lye.

These four lines (7-10) from John Donne’s “The Paradox” (1633)¹ present two forms of excess: on the one hand physiological excess, excessive heat being caused by the fire of love; on the other hand rhetorical excess, as the poem is based on the hyperbolic metaphor of love as death – a Petrarchan metaphor. This poem therefore exemplifies the predominantly excessive nature of desire. It seems indeed logical that discourses about love, and love poetry in particular, should exceed rhetorical, physiological or even moral norms of control, temperance or balance. This is not, however, the way they were initially codified.

In the third book of his *Arte of English Poesie* (1588), Puttenham reminded the reader of the rules of *decorum* as they had been used in Greek and Latin rhetoric and poetry:

[…] all hymnes and histories, and Tragedies, were written in the high stile, all Comedies and Enterludes and other common Poesies of loves, and such like in the meane stile, all Eglogues and pastorall poems in the low and base stile. (127)

This distribution of style was not just done according to genre: it also had to do with the social status of the characters depicted. The “high stile” was to be used not only for “Gods and divine things,” but also for “the noble gests and great fortunes of Princes”; the “meane stile” for “meane men, their life and business, as lawyers, gentlemen, and marchants, good housholders and honest Citizens”; the “low and base stile,” finally, concerned “the doings of the common artificer, serving man, yeoman, groome, husbandman, day-labourer, sailor, shepheard, swynard.” There is ground for doubting that this rhetorical and social categorisation was systematically put to use in the way Puttenham accounts for it. While “poesies of love” were supposed to be written in the middle style, poets interested in the topic might have had counterexamples in mind. The Italian epic poems of Boiardo, Ariosto

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¹ This poem was first published in 1633, but was written earlier. It was entitled “The Paradox” slightly later, in 1635.
and Tasso, for instance, provided models that dealt with the folly of love. The association of the topic of love with the epic was not restricted to imitations of works like *Orlando Furioso*. Michael Drayton’s *Heroicall Epistles* (1597), for instance, a collection of verse letters modelled on Ovid’s *Heroids* which seems to have been immensely popular, necessarily transgressed the rule of the three styles – not even considering the fact that Drayton’s love sonnet sequence *Idea* was appended to it in the 1599 edition as well as in the following ones. In a more general way, it hardly seems possible to have abided by Puttenham’s codification of the love discourse as requiring a middle style. As most readers of Elizabethan love sonnet sequences have noticed, the very names of the beloved ladies (Stella, Diana, Delia or Idea, to name but a few) indicate a process of praise that only just falls short of divinisation. In that case, how was the poet to apply the rules of *decorum*? Would the very nature of the lady not require the use of a high style, even if love was supposed to be sung in a middle style?

The three styles are also related to the emotions they are supposed to trigger. In Cicero’s *Orator* already, the middle style (as opposed to an ornate and copious high style) was aimed at making discourse agreeable. But love poetry could express (or even arouse) violent emotions, and in that sense, could depart both from the rhetorical codification of agreeable discourse and from the physiological and moral ideals of control and temperance. One of the four cardinal virtues and a major concern of a set of nascent discourses on the passions, Temperance found a poetic illustration in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, in which the Knight of Temperance undergoes the ordeal of the Bower of Bliss. The ability to control one’s desires was a central concern of the period, as Michael Schoenfeldt asserts: “The Renaissance seems to have imagined selves as differentiated not by their desires, which all more or less share, but by their capacity to control these desires” (17). This focus on Temperance and control made Italianate culture, and especially love poetry, particularly suspicious. The very first collection of Italianate love poetry, *The Courte of Venus* (c.1535-39), was sharply criticised and later rejected and parodied in John

2. The work seems to have been published in more than ten different editions from 1597 to Drayton’s death in 1631. As early as 1600, William Alexander wrote commendatory verses that stated that “Ovid’s soule reviv[ed] in Drayton.”

3. In England, the question was made even more relevant by the translation of Justus Lipsius’s *De Constantia* by John Stradling in 1594.
Hall’s *The Court of Virtue* (1565).\(^4\) The dual attitude of the English towards Italianate culture, their mixed feelings of fascination and repulsion (see Fox) became even more ambiguous with the rise of Calvinism and Puritanism in the 1590s.

In physiological terms, the ideal Temperance could be reached by achieving the balance of the four humours. A lover could hardly be expected to be temperate, as love and desire caused a heating up and a progressive drying up of the body through the evacuation of water, i.e. tears.\(^5\) This resulted in the frequent description, in poems and plays of the period, of lovers as excessively choleric (hot and dry) or melancholic (cold and dry) types. These two temperaments include in some way the notion of excess. Since Aristotle’s *Problemata* XXX, melancholy had been associated with exceptional natures and with *furor*. Similarly, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, cholera was sometimes considered to be the humour of heroes – whose nature allowed them to compensate for the detrimental effects of excess:

so may the heroical and generous spirits converse with unstaide appetites and yet not have the least tang of their excesse, but by their diviner *Nosce Teipsum* may be their own guardians, both for their Coelestiall and also earthy parts. (Walkington 9)

It seems therefore that excess could be acceptable for a truly exceptional nature, not to be mistaken for mere self-love and boasting:

as for them who are tainted with […] self love & love of glory, who being lifted up with the hand of fortune to the top of natures preheminence as pety gods doe direct their imaginations far beyond the levill of humilitie beeing swolne with timpanizing pride too much, admiring themselves with *Narcissus* who was inamoured with his owne beauty. (Walkington 4)

A poetics of excess could only be ambiguous. It either expressed an unbalanced but heroic nature, or it was the result of too much self-love and pride, and in that case was morally dubious.

All these aspects might explain why love sonnets were satirised and parodied in the late sixteenth century. My contention here is that

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\(^4\) See especially stanzas 42 and 43 in the prologue.

\(^5\) Renaissance descriptions of this physiological process could be found in slightly different versions in Ficino’s *In Convivium*, works such as Timothy Bright’s *Treatise of Melancholy* (1586) and Thomas Wright’s *The Passions of the Minde in General* (1602), or in treatises of anatomy.
the problem is not so much conventionality (as late twentieth-century critics consistently maintained) as excess. The following analyses do not deal with the sonnets themselves, but rather contrast the late sixteenth-century parodies and satires with what the critical developments of the last thirty years have taught us about them. These recent analyses share a common interest in contextualisation that belies the earlier focus on form that still permeates much critical discourse on the sonnets, especially when its focus is not so much the sonnet as Petrarchan elements or sonnets within plays. This paper will thus address the following questions: what exactly did those texts that we are sure were attacks against Petrarchan poetry (that is, parodies and satires) criticise in them? Is what they single out specific to the Petrarchan love sonnet? What was constantly criticised, but, I will argue, also taken into account by the sonneteers, was both moral and formal excess. And the two of them were not unrelated.  

**Parodies and satires**

Focusing on parodies and satires of the love sonnet seems the best way to identify precisely the reasons why certain Elizabethans rejected it. One of the best-known and also most interesting parodies is Sir John Davies’s series of nine *Gullinge sonnets* written in the 1590s and published in 1597. Sir John Davies had studied law at the New Inn and at the Middle Temple in the 1580s and early 1590s. The Inns of Court being the places where much poetry – including Petrarchan love sonnets – was read and written, he was in a privileged position to know and parody them. It cannot be hoped in a few pages to account for all the devices Davies uses, but a few prevailing features of his poems can be singled out, and his purpose explained, starting from the dedicatory sonnet:

6. As Donne’s poem shows, one of the questions that love poetry addresses is excess: physiological excess, that is, excess of heat triggered by the fire of desire, which must be understood literally. This “dis-temperature,” this lack of balance of the four humours, is expressed through a rhetoric that is by essence excessive. It mostly relies on hyperbole, death being, for example, a hyperbolic metaphor of the pain of love.

7. In sonnet 7, the lover exposes how Cupid brings disorder into “the middle Temple of [his] hearte,” an obvious reference to the context in which many love sonnets were written, and also a way of presenting sonnet writing as student mischief.
HERE my Camelion Muse her selfe doth chaunge
to dier shapes of gross absurdities,
and like an Antick mocks wth fashion straunge
the fond admirers of lewde gulleries.
Your iudgement sees wth pitty, and wth scorne
The bastard Sonnetts of the Rymers bace,
Wch in this whiskinge age are daily borne
To their own shames, and Poetrie’ s disgrace.
Yet some praise those and some perchappes will praise
euen these of myne : and therefore thes I send
to you that pass in Courte yo’ glorious dayes;
Yf if some rich rash gull these Rimes commend
Thus you may sett this formall witt to schoole,
Vse yo’ owne grace, and begg him for a foole.

Davies presents his series of sonnets as pieces in the satiric tradition:\his “Camelion Muse,” who changes “to divers shapes,” is reminiscient
of the tradition of Menippean satire; being “like an Antick,” its purpose
seems to present a grotesque version of the sonnet to ridicule it. He
calls the sonnets “lewde gulleries,” pointing at the same time to the
moral question love poetry raises and to the fact that to him, sonnets
are pieces of pretended eloquence. The target of this first quatrains
seems to be as much the sonnets themselves as those who admire them.
In the second quatrains, the attacks against sonneteers are particularly
strong, both explicitly (“Rymers bace”; “their own shames”; “Poetrie’s
disgrace”) and implicitly: the phrase “bastard sonnets” is particularly
derogatory in an age when poetic creation was often described in
terms of paternity (Rose 38), and might imply that the supposed authors
of the sonnets were “apes” of their French or Italian predecessors.\nThe readers of sonnets are such “gulls” that they might be literally
“fooled” by the parody – that is, unmasked as the fools that they are,
not realising that the sonnets they are reading or praising to show
their own taste are in fact written in jest.

The very quality and playfulness of Davies’s parodies renders
their acerbitiy ambiguous: it is difficult not to imagine the pleasure the
author took in imitating the thematic and formal features of the

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8. The Gullinge Sonnets are parodies in that they imitate a precise style to mock
it; they belong to satire in so far as they expose the failings of writers and lovers of
sonnets in order to chastise them.

9. Erasmus famously called “apes” those humanists he considered to be bad
imitators of Cicero.
sonnets he claimed to despise. One of the sonneteers of the 1590s, Michael Drayton, was probably one of the poets Davies attacked. In an epigram called *In Decium*, the latter implicitly referred to the eighth sonnet of *Ideas Mirrour* (1594), in which the lady was declared to be, among others, the tenth Worthy:  

Audacious Painters have nine worthies made,  
But Poet Decius more audacious farre,  
Making his mistres march with men of warre,  
With title of tenth worthie doth her lade.

This example is particularly telling in that Davies levels criticism at one of the mechanisms of praise characteristic of the sonnet of the 1590s. Coming after a long tradition of love poetry, poets seem to have felt the only possible way to praise their lady was to make their language even more hyperbolic than their predecessors’. This was all too easy a matter to pick on for a satirist. The first “gulling sonnet” also ridicules hyperbolic metaphors:

The Lover under burthen of his Mistress love,  
Which lyke to Aetna did his harte oppresse:  
Did give such piteous grones that he did move  
The heav’nes at length to pity his distresse.  
But for the fates in their highe Courte above  
Forbad to make the grievous burthen lesse,  
The gracious powers did all conspire to prove  
Yf miracles this mischeife mighte redresse.  
Therefore regardinge that the loade was such  
As noe man mighte with one mans mighte sustayne,  
And that mylde patience imported much  
To him that shold indure an endlesse payne,  
By their decree he soone transformed was:  
Into a patiente burden-bearinge Asse.

The metaphors used in this sonnet are characteristic of the sonnet of the 1590s: love is like fire (and therefore, hyperbolically, “like to Aetna”); the pain of the lover is expressed in “piteous grones” (which could be interpreted as hyperbolic versions of the sighs of the Petrarchan lover); love is so painful that it is a “burthen” whose weight can only be eased by calling to superior powers, possibly an allusion to the religious and mystic vocabulary of several early sequences of the

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10. It must also be noted that *Ideas Mirrour* and the *Gullinge Sonnets* were dedicated to the same patron, Sir Anthony Cooke.
1590s (Daniel’s *Delia*, Constable’s *Delia* or Drayton’s *Ideas Mirrour*) that the sonneteers found in Desportes’s poetry (Scott 293). But the satirist’s acute criticism is mostly revealed in the final couplet. The transformation of the lover into an ass is a grotesque allusion to Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* which is strongly reminiscent of Bottom’s translation in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (a play that was probably performed for the first time in 1594 or 1595). But it also leads the reader to reassess the rest of the poem, and to understand terms like “grones” or “burthen” in a new way.

Davies’s technique is of particular interest here. He first makes hyperbole even more hyperbolic, duplicating the writing process of the sonneteers of the 1590s. At the end of the poem, he makes sure that the reader perceives hyperbole as inflated language by introducing the ass metaphor, which leads to the literalisation of several metaphors or similes used before. His purpose is to abate the pride of those inflated sonneteers who write in such excessive terms of their love and pain. Joseph Hall, who also satirises the love sonnet in his *Virgidemiarum*, makes a similar point:

Great is the folly of a feeble braine,
Ore-ruld with love, and tyrannous disdaine:
For love, how-ever in the basest brest
It breeds high thoughts that feede the fancy best,
Yet is he blinde, and leades poore fooles awrie,
While they hang gazing on their mistres-eie.

(*Virgidemiarum* I.vii.1-6)

The poem insists on that fact that the task the poet has set himself is unattainable. An overreacher, the Petrarchan lover cannot be good enough for his misplaced ambitions. The questions these lines raise, the excesses they denounce – the madness of love, the “high thoughts” and the related hyperbolic language they produce – can be understood in the context of moral and stylistic interrogations of the period, as I will show below.

But first, it must be insisted that one of the devices used in the first of Davies’s *Gullinge Sonnets* is repeated several times in his short sequence. Sonnets 4, 6 and 9 literalise tropes to the point of ridicule.\(^{11}\)

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11. Sonnet 6 elaborates on the commonplace metaphor of love as a naked child, which probably originates in Diotima’s discourse on love reported by Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium*. Love gets clothed in the course of the sonnet, his garments being hope, beauty, craft, desire, grief, strife, etc., the last two of them being, anticlimactically,
The hardnes of her harte and truth of myne
when the all seeinge eyes of heauen did see
they streight concluded y' by powre devine
to other formes our hartes should turnèd be.
Then hers as hard as flynne, a Flynte became
and myne as true as steele, to steele was turned,
and then betwene o' hartes sprange forthe the flame
of kindest loue, w^th vnextinguish’d burned;
And longe the sacred lampe of mutuall loue
incessantlie did burne in glory brighte;
Vntill my folly did her fury moue
to recompense my seruice w^th despighte,
and to put out w^th snuffers of her pride
the lampe of loue w^th els had neuer dyed. (Sonnet 4)

The poem relies on topoi of love poetry: the lover’s heart is true, while the lady’s is “hard.” To this first level of figurative language is added a second level: steel is true, so the lover’s heart is steel; flint is hard, so the lady’s heart is flint. Flint and steel rubbed one against the other produce a spark that light up fire, a commonplace metaphor of love. This piling up of figurative language is more commonly associated with later poetry, but it is characteristic of the Elizabethan sonnet as well. In rhetorical terms, this process is close to that observed in metalepsis, which Puttenham calls “the farfet”:

But the sence is much altered & the hearers conceit strangly entangled by the figure Metalepsis, which I call the farfet, as when we had rather fetch a word a great way off than to use one nerer hand to expresse the matter aswel & plainer. And it seemeth the deviser of this figure, had a desire to please women rather than men: for we use to say by manner of Proverbe: things farrefet and deare bought are good for Ladies: so in this manner of speech we use it, leaping over the heads of a great many words, we take one that is furdest off, to utter our matter by. (152)

Interestingly, Puttenham mentions a proverb that implies that such figures are appropriate to please ladies, which might explain their use

presumption and sullenness. In sonnet 9, love, which is metaphorised as the ward of the lover’s wit, mistreats it and marries it to vanity. The conclusion is, again comically anticlimactic: “[Love] holds my witte now for an Ideott.”

12. Davies’s poem is not much more far-fetched than some of those he seeks to parody. See for instance sonnet 3 in Barnabe Barnes’ Parthenophil and Parthenophe: the lover has imprisoned his thoughts to prevent them from yielding to temptation, but the keys (i.e., the senses) are successively snatched, allowing the theft of the heart.
in love sonnets. More precisely, however, the technique that is used in several instances in Davies’s sonnets is the use of a chain of metaphors whose combination leads to the literalisation of an encompassing metaphor – the metaphor of love as fire in sonnet 4. Whether we consider this as metalepsis or not, what interests Davies is the convoluted reasoning that combines metaphors to achieve a specific form of amplification or copia.

Repetition of one specific formal feature is a technique Davies also employs within each separate sonnet. Anadiplosis is repeatedly used in sonnet 3, as the second half of each line constitutes the first half of the next line. In sonnet 5, the technique of correlative verse is systematised until it becomes absurd and until the poem becomes rather hard to understand:

Mine Eye, myne eare, my will, my witt, my harte,
Did see, did heare, did like, discerne, did love,
Her face, her speche, her fashion, judgement, arte,
Which did charme, please, delighte, confounde and move. (1-4)

In sonnet 8, Davies strives to include at least two legal terms in each line. The name “Zepheria,” mentioned in the first line, is an obvious reference to an anonymous sonnet sequence published in 1594 entitled Zepheria and known for its repetitive use of legal vocabulary. Other devices systematically used are oxymoron, antithesis, and binary structures, which are part of an excessive reliance on form: in sonnet 6, for instance, one suspects it is alliteration as much as meaning that determines the choice of words.

In the last line of the last sonnet, the lover’s wit is regarded as “an Ideott.” What Davies tries to demonstrate is indeed the foolishness of lover-poets and the related emptiness of the rhetoric of the love sonnet. In his view (which, it must be said, is rather accurate), this rhetoric is rooted in a certain form of verbal virtuosity, an ornate language in which form is brought to the fore. It is based on the repetition of specific techniques (and its structural consequence, accumulation) and themes commonly used in the 1590s. The parody also specifically targets devices of amplification that are combined to enhance the effect achieved (hyperboles, metaphors), resulting in the literalisation of certain topos (which can also be observed in the sonnet sequences, not always in a more moderate way than in Davies’s poems). Davies’s target therefore seems to be an ornate, copious style, closer to the high style of the epic than to the middle style in
which love poetry was supposed to be written. The excesses of his style cannot therefore be reduced to the fact that his poems are grotesque caricatures. Paradoxically, in targeting this type of language, Davies was part of a tradition in which the love sonnet also originated.

**Stylistic and moral excess**

One of the most acclaimed poets of the previous decades, John Lyly, had written about *Euphues* (1578), a young man who could speak well but initially failed to see how vacant and morally misleading such language was without a full philosophical and theological education. Lyly also prefaced Watson’s *Hekatompathia*. The Petrarchan sonneteers of the 1590s seem to have taken into account this question of the morally dangerous power of language – and of love. I want to argue that it is this background that led many of them to adopt what one could call a rhetoric of excess. The central figure of speech in this rhetoric is hyperbole. Peacham provides the following definition of this figure of speech:

Hyperbole, when a saying doth surmounte and reach above the truth, the use whereof, is very frequent in augmenting, diminishing, praysing, and dispraysing of persons and thinges [...]. Here is to bee marked that this fygure is not used to deceave, by exceeding the compasse of truth, but useth extreame wordes, to shew that the thing we affyrme, is very great, or very small, so that we use an incredible saying, to shew that the truth wee affirme, is almost incredible. (Sig. Ei, italics mine)

Puttenham similarly insists on the need for measure in the use of hyperbole:

this manner of speach is used, when either we would greatly advance or greatly abase the reputation of any thing or person, and must be used very discreetly [...] although a prayse or other report may be allowed beyond credit, it may not be beyond all measure. (159-60, italics mine)

Hyperbole should not be excessive. The morally questionable dimension of this figure appears in the way Puttenham calls it: “the loud lyer”; “the overreacher.” How better to characterise a lover who was indulging in sin? Transgressing the rule of not going beyond all measure was relevant to sonneteers for two related reasons. Firstly, they wrote love poetry that praised a lady. This means that this lady was implicitly compared to Laura and other beloved ladies of the Petrarchan tradition.
One of the ways to voice this praise was to use a language that was more hyperbolic than that used before. Secondly, using excessively hyperbolic language drew attention to the lover and to his “youthful error,” to paraphrase Petrarch.

This conclusion can be generalised to several modes of amplification that are used in the love sonnets. The blazon, for instance, is a form of *divisio*, which, according to Hoskins, numbers among forms of amplification. Hoskins also includes accumulation in amplification devices. To him, accumulation is the “heaping up of many terms of praise or accusing, importing the same matter without descending to any part” (24). The constant rephrasing of the divinity of the lady, of the pain that the lover endured, are part of this. The mention “without descending to any part” is particularly interesting: what makes accumulation is putting all the terms – or the syntactic units – on the same level. This is precisely one of the features that Sir John Davies noticed and then parodied in his *Gullinge Sonnets*. Puttenham also considers that all the figures of repetition he describes (*Arte of Poesie* 163-68) are used for purposes of amplification, because they are “tunable to the eares”; in other words, they are auricular figures. This historical context was taken into account by critics of the 1980s and 1990s, who insisted on the centrality of moral and intercultural issues to understand the love sonnet sequence.

**Critical accounts of love in the sonnet sequences of the 1590s**

In 1989, Thomas P. Roche Jr. provided an insightful reading of the sonnet sequences of the 1590s that questioned previous assumptions. While the fashion for biographical criticism had long passed by that date, the idea that the poetic voice of the love sonnet was that of its author and that it had to be taken at face value were still the basis of much criticism. Against this trend, Roche wrote: “What if we were not to sympathize with the plight of the poet-lover but to assess it as the narcissistic self-indulgence it is?” (viii). More recent works on Sidney, Daniel, Fulke Greville or Drayton, for instance, have largely confirmed this view. Late sixteenth-century English Petrarchism was part of a wave of Italianism that was fundamentally ambiguous. While Italian literature was often enthusiastically embraced, it was also deemed suspicious, or even rejected on moral grounds. In his book entitled *The English Renaissance: Identity and Representation in Elizabethan England*, Alistair Fox has shown that Italian culture
“seemed to the godly to epitomize the amorality, atheism and sinful decadence of the papistical order their country had rejected” (6). The Petrarchan poet was therefore caught between his/her interest in Italian or Italianate poetry on the one hand and a form of religious and moral pressure on the other. Hence Roche’s reading of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*: to him, “Astrophil is not a hero, and he is not a hero precisely because he succumbs so wholeheartedly to the pursuit of his desires. He teaches morality by negative example” (195). Unquestionably, in the sequence, Astrophil shows his awareness that he is indulging in the wrong kind of love, acknowledging that fact while being unable to change his course of action: “True, and yet true that I must Stella love” (Sonnet 5, 14). In the same way, Zara Bruzzi explains that in Samuel Daniel’s *Delia* (1592), the lover decides to renounce his morally dangerous desire in the course of the sequence. Elayne Ho shows that Fulke Greville’s *Caelica*, which was probably written in the 1580s, was a Calvinist condemnation of earthly love.

The precise history of the mutations that led from the Petrarchan love sonnet to Baroque poetics is still not very well-known. Elisabeth Soubrenie has convincingly shown the importance of conversion in metaphysical poetry. But conversion was not alien to earlier poetics. The whole point of the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* was for Petrarch to explain his “youthful error” and how he redirected his earthly love for Laura towards God after her death. The dual structure of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* (*In vita / In morte di Laura*) was still echoed in Petrarchan poetry as late as 1582: Thomas Watson’s *Hekatompithia*, a major source of inspiration for the sonneteers of the 1590s, was divided into two sections, the second of which was entitled “A farewell to love,” echoing the second part of Petrarch’s work, in which the death of Laura leads to the lover’s realisation that his love

13. Recent works contend that right from the start, Italianate poetry was caught in the context of sixteenth-century religious struggles. See for example Hamrick and Warner.

14. French criticism has been particularly interested in the baroque, but not really in the poetry of the end of the 1590s, Donne excepted. Anglophone critics have been far less concerned with the notion of the baroque. As a general rule, few studies have attempted to bridge the gap between the Elizabethan sonneteers and the Metaphysical and/or Baroque poets, and most studies of the Petrarchan love poetry of the 1590s have adopted a synchronic, rather than diachronic, outlook.

15. In Petrarchan poetics, conversion is first and foremost moral, while the conversion that is central to metaphysical poetry according to Soubrenie is primarily religious and spiritual.
has been misplaced and should be directed towards God. In this instance, English Petrarchism seems to have been rather faithful to Petrarch’s perspective: the same structure of conversion was replicated by a few English sonneteers of the 1590s who wrote and/or published religious sonnets after their love sonnets and apologised for their past mistakes. In many ways, several of the love sonnet sequences of the end of Elizabeth’s reign could thus be construed as (most of the time) unfinished conversion narratives, in which the failure of moral improvement was expressed through a language of excess. In that sense, they were ambiguous, and ran the risk of making the reader indulge in the very moral pitfalls they exposed. Other examples than those cited above include Thomas Lodge’s *Phillis* (1594), in which the lover realises his error (in an ode added after the last sonnet), Michael Drayton’s *Ideas Mirrour* (1594), which explores the language of idealisation better to point to its limits (see Vuillemin, especially 165-228), Spenser’s *Amoretti* (1595), which shows how the lover’s desire is tamed and moralised through marriage.

The inclusion of an inherited language of love in the sonnet was therefore more complex than has sometimes been asserted, and had to do with more than just formal concerns. The following case-study will show that a number of the features of the love sonnet that were parodied and satirised were also used in other forms of literary creation for specific purposes.

16. The examples of Henry Constable, but also much more strikingly Barnabe Barnes, are telling. In the first sonnet of his *Divine Centurie of Spiritual Sonnets*, Barnes states “No more lewde laies of lighter Loves I sing.”

17. For a Catholic criticism of this interest in earthly rather than godly love, see Robert Southwell’s prefatory material (“The Author to his loving Cosen”) to his *Saint Peters Complaint, With other Poemes* (1595): “POETS, by abusing their talents, and making the follies and feignings of love the customary subject of their base endeavours, have so discredited this faculty, that a poet, a lover, and a liar, are by many reckoned but three words of one signification. […] Christ himself, […] gave his Spouse a method to imitate, […] and to all men a pattern, to know the true use of this measured style. […] But the devil, as he affecteth deity and seeketh to have all the compliments of divine honour applied to his service, so hath he among the rest possessed also most Poets with his idle fancies […].”

18. The notion of conversion seems harder to apply to sequences such as the anonymous *Zepheria* (1594), E. C.’s *Emaricdulfe* (1595), Percy’s *Coelia* (1595), Linche’s *Diella* (1596) and Griffin’s *Fidessa* (1596), which are still in need of in-depth critical treatment.
Romeo and Juliet and the language of the love sonnet

The first Shakespearean play that springs to mind when considering love is Romeo and Juliet. It is also a play in which the sonnet form is repeatedly used, as in the prologues of acts 1 and 2, or the “shared sonnet” in act 1 scene 5, lines 92-106. In the introduction to the latest Arden edition of the play, René Weis states the following:

Up to the moment where he sees Juliet, Romeo’s language of love consists of strings of self-conscious oxymorons, lifeless clichés incapable of expressing true emotion, mere verbiage of melancholy suitable for moping in groves or sycamores (appropriate behaviour for lovesick – ‘sick amor’ – young men). (9)

This is what has generally been said about Romeo’s love. Critics have contrasted Romeo’s love for Rosaline on the one hand, and his love for Juliet on the other.

ROMEO Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate,
O anything of nothing first create,
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshappen chaos of well-seeming forms,
Feather of lead, bright smoke, colde fire, sick health,
Still-waking sleep that is not what it is. (1.1.174-79)

As Gayle Whittier remarks, Romeo “heaps oxymoron on oxymoron” (29). But what allows Shakespeare to contrast Romeo’s false love for Rosaline with his true love for Juliet, is precisely the repetition and the combination of the oxymorons, rather than the oxymorons themselves. Similarly, the repeated use of “O,” that is, of apostrophe, is particularly heavy-handed. This, however, cannot be said to be a bad piece of drama: it is very effective in picturing Romeo’s love at this point in the play – and is therefore a powerful tool of characterisation. The dullness of this language of love is easily contrasted with

19. However, I disagree with Whittier’s contention that “the Petrarchan word is especially non-referential, with its obvious hyperbole, celestial compliments, and paradox” (30). More precisely, I believe that what Whittier describes is an effect achieved by Shakespeare through a specific use of the Petrarchan language, based on the density of the elements he draws from it. The idea (formulated before its author could read Thomas P. Roche Jr.’s ground-breaking study) that the nature of Petrarchan language implies idealisation and abstraction from the material world is a critical assumption that betrayed imperfect knowledge of the English tradition of the love lyric and is perhaps based on the false notion that Petrarchism is to be equated with Neoplatonic idealisation.
one of the best-known passages in the play, the “shared sonnet” in Act 1, scene 5:

**ROMEO** If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss

**JULIET** Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims’ hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss.

**ROMEO** Have not saints lips and holy palmers too?

**JULIET** Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

**ROMEO** O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do—
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

**JULIET** Saints do not move, though grant for prayers’ sake.

**ROMEO** Then move not while my prayer’s effect I take. [Kisses her]

It cannot be said that this passage has nothing to do with the Elizabethan Petrarchan sonnet. The use of the term “shrine,” for instance, or the description of love as “devotion,” are very common in the sonnets of the 1590s – and are to be found in the works of the French poet who had the most influence on the Elizabethan sonneteers, that is, Desportes (Scott 293). From the point of view of structure, the sonnet is not untypical. The first two quatrains correspond to two steps that establish the foundations of the conceit of the poem: the kiss as a form of devotion. The end of the second quatrain corresponds to the turn, which in the Petrarchan sonnet marks a shift in logic or a change of topic. Here, it initiates the progressive assimilation of hands and lips. The final couplet, which was the key-moment in Elizabethan sonnets, makes the parallel literal, as it results in physical contact.

What makes this sonnet powerful is the intricacy of the rhetoric of the sonnet and the action that takes place on stage. The Petrarchan *topos* of love as devotion is made literal, not just in the speech of the lover, but also in the final kiss. The sonnet does not stray away from this *topos*. Rather, it elaborates on it to give it new relevance. It cannot be said, therefore, that true love is expressed here in a language that departs from the language of the love sonnets. It is rather a question of density: here, there is no accumulation of devices taken from the love sonnet, but one conceit – a conceit that is typical of the love sonnet of the 1590s – is developed.

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The shift in Petrarchan poetics: from accumulative density to pointed poetics

Such use of the language of love was not restricted to drama. It was part of a wider change in poetics that could be observed in England, as is exemplified in Donne’s “The Paradox.” In this poem, the Petrarchan topoi of love as death is playfully exploited. Already in the love sonnet of the 1590s, but much more so in the poetry of Donne and his followers, Petrarchan references are fewer in number but are developed, sometimes, as in Donne’s poem, so as to explore the paradoxes they entail. This shift in poetics is to be placed in the wider context of European poetics. In “The Paradox,” Donne voluntarily confuses the literal meaning of death with its use as a metaphor to describe the pain of love. This is what Mercedes Blanco formulates as “the relatively unexpected encounter of two discourses whose linguistic and logical rules are different,” i.e., a concepto in Gracian’s theory or a concetto in Tesauro’s. What is important is the effect that is produced, the acumen (agudeza or argutezza) that the reader is made to feel. In England as elsewhere, this type of effect is best understood in the context of the development of the epigram at the end of the sixteenth century, “a short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought, to which the rest of the composition is intended to lead up” (Hoyt 2). This form aroused much interest because it provided the shortest possible poetic unit, and was therefore a condensed version of the problems with which poets were confronted (Blanco 168).

Such a shift in poetics was already happening in the English sonnet at the end of Elizabeth’s reign. The distribution of the lines of verse in three quatrains and a couplet (rather than two quatrains and two tercets as in most French or Italian sonnets), which was dominant in the English sonnet of the 1590s, meant that the volta or turn (the thematic or logical change upon which the sonnet hinged), which was

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20. On the birth and development of “pointed poetics,” see Hoyt and Blanco. For a case study, see Vuillemin.
21. “Le croisement relativement imprévisible de deux discours soumis à des règles linguistiques et logiques différentes” (Blanco 299). Terms require caution here. In English, the term “conceit” has varying meanings and, as Rosemond Tuve showed more than half a century ago, the opposition between the Petrarchan and the metaphysical conceit is neither clear nor helpful. Moreover, as Mercedes Blanco shows, terms such as conceit, concetto, concepto, agudezza, argutezza or pointe do not all correspond to the same theories or, for that matter, realities.
more traditionally situated at the end of the second quatrain, tended to disappear or at least to become weaker. At the same time, the final couplet brought a resolution of logical or thematic tension in many of the “fourteeners” that were written in the period. Paradoxically, this very structure might have been one of the reasons for the accumulative density that I have described above: the apparent lack of sound structuring devices in the quatrains could be compensated by the conclusive dimension of the couplet.

As a whole, the sonnet allowed for considerably more variation than we might think today, and Petrarchism did not disappear overnight. There were, however, a number of mutations. Petrarchan topoi were increasingly implied, rather than plainly stated; Petrarchan tropes (like the competition between the lady and the sun) paved the way for structural devices; the density of Petrarchan elements was alleviated. Poets like Donne did use Petrarchan topoi, but were more interested in developing them and showing their inner contradictions than in enumerating them.

After analysing those examples, it seems clear that the Elizabethans who rejected the love sonnet found it far-fetched, too repetitive, too hyperbolic, or even “new-fangled,” but certainly not “conventional,” a judgement that might be valid in hindsight but had no sound foundation at a time when the related concept of originality had not yet been formulated as a criterion of literary value. What they disliked was excess, and more precisely moral and formal excess, undoubtedly a key notion to understand the poetics of many love sonnet sequences of the 1590s. The rhetoric of excess to which sonneteers resorted was adapted to their purposes: praise, of course, but also, when the sonnets were organised in sequences, the – somewhat ambiguous – exploration of the limits of the language of love. Certain aspects of this rhetoric were particularly consistent with the questioning of language: excessive hyperbole, the systematic use of repetition, of oxymoron, and a number of other set devices that poets found in the works of their predecessors. Other modes of amplification remained in use in the works of their followers, often combined with Petrarchan topoi, or more generally, with one Petrarchan topos which was analysed and developed. This very gradual evolution did not correspond to a rejection of Petrarchism, but rather to a reduction of the density of Petrarchan elements in the poem. What is
more, it seems that some of these evolutions were already taking place in the sonnets of the 1590s.

In his introduction to the *New Oxford Book of Seventeenth-Century Verse*, Alastair Fowler wrote the following:

One misconception must be dismissed at the outset: that there was a great revolution early in the century, whereby Donne and his new army of Metaphysical poets overthrew Tudor conventionality, and introduced a style of concrete sensuous particularity. (xxxvii)

What Fowler means by “Tudor conventionality” clearly includes Petrarchism, and also its privileged form: the sonnet. The love sonnet is a case in point of the way the understanding of a poetic form is shaped by a conjunction of factors: preconceptions as to what literature should be, processes of canon formation, and, simply, historical echoes. 22 While the sonnet (not least the Elizabethan sonnet) was praised as one of the foremost poetic forms by the Romantics, it was then set against both Elizabethan drama and metaphysical poetry in the course of the twentieth century. As Alastair Fowler explains, it is time now to see the history of poetry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in terms of continuity rather than rupture, and be done with certain critical excesses.

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22. The role of T. S. Eliot in establishing the reputation of the Metaphysical poets, for instance, is quite well-known. He found in their poetry something that echoed his own conceptions.
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WALKINGTON, Thomas. *The Opticke Glasse of Humors or The touchstone of a golden temperature, or the Philosophers stowe to make a golden temper, Wherein the foure complections Sanguine, Cholericke, Phlegmaticke, Melancholicke are succinctly painted forth, and their externall intimates laide open to the purblind eye of ignorance it selfe, by which every one may judge of what complection he is, and answerably learne what is most suitable to nature*. London: John Windet for Martin Clerke, 1607.


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